



# Pesach in August

**A**pril. Another year, another Pesach *Seder*. The guests, the goblets, the wine, the food, the *Seder* plate, the questions, the answers. Frankly, it's arduous, but I wouldn't have it any other way.

In the midst of this year's Pesach pandemic, I find myself remembering the *Seder* we hosted 20, not 12, months ago. It too was replete with guests, goblets, wine, food and a *Seder* plate. But oddly enough, although there were answers, there were no questions – unless you count the unspoken ones.

So many of my loved ones were there: brothers and sisters-in-law, nieces and nephews, cousins, friends and, last but not least, my husband and children. They all joined me for an event I'd been anticipating for years: my polio *Seder*, commemorating – no, celebrating – my 50th polio anniversary.



## August 13, 1955

A mere four months earlier, Dr. Jonas Salk had announced that his polio vaccine worked. As journalist Linda Ellerbee put it, "We actually saw a disease die." But over the next four months, it was *my* life that hung in the balance.

50 years later, we gathered round the table to retell and relive my passage from death's door back to life. The polio *Seder* plate, like its Pesach counterpart, occupied center stage. Each item adorning it was a catalyst, propelling us from August 1955 to the present, from slavery to freedom, not once but many times over.

## The Milkshake

I drew my guests' attention to a delicate glass goblet filled with a non-dairy chocolate milkshake. As we sipped that sweet beverage, my bittersweet saga continued to unfold.

My father rarely mentioned the after-midnight call, several days after my diagnosis was confirmed. "Mr. Willig, your daughter is having difficulty breathing, so we've placed her in an iron lung." That chilling sentence was the only memory fragment through which I could relive that crisis.

Then, in 2002, a miracle happened. I ran into a woman named Helen, who told me that in August 1955, when I had contracted polio, she was the student nurse assigned to me. I was overjoyed. I begged Helen, "Tell me everything you remember." And she did. Her concluding words were the most precious: "Most of all, I remember your father. He came to see you at least once a day. Soon after you arrived, you began to have difficulty breathing and swallowing, so we had to put you in an iron lung. Your father would arrive every day with a milkshake and a straw. Helping you to take a few sips was a complicated business. He had to reach into one of the iron lung's portholes, position the milkshake near your mouth, and wait until the iron lung exhaled. Those few intermittent seconds offered the only chance to get some crucial nutrients into your system. Your father's gentle patience was a marvel to behold."

As we each sipped our milkshakes at the polio *Seder*, my father's love was palpable as it surely had been 50 years earlier.

## The Pencil

The next item on our *Seder* plate paid tribute to another man, one whose name I never knew. Pointing to a pencil on which was embossed the word "Breathtaking!"; I spoke of a respiratory therapist who stopped by to assess my vital lung capacity in 1959, recording his findings on a clipboard. At one point, he erased something, puckering his lips to blow the shavings away. "Oh, please," I begged, "let me do that!" "Sure," he replied. I blew with all my might. Not a single shaving moved. The therapist nodded empathically. "Yeah," he said, "this is really hard to do."

I invited my guests to take the pencil adjacent to their plate, write a word on their place card, erase it and blow the shavings away with all their might. As mine scattered across the table, I felt an exhilaration that truly took my breath away.

## Beets and Mashed Potatoes

It was time to eat the *maror*, the bitter herbs, and remember Pharaoh. Blond, pale, stout and unsmiling, Miss Gillespie, RN, was the Pharaoh of Goldwater Memorial Hospital. One afternoon, she marched over to me, my lunch tray in hand. On it was a plate of breaded fish, mashed potatoes and sliced beets the color of dried blood. Eyeing it warily, I announced, "I'll have fish and mashed potatoes. No beets, please." "Suit yourself," she muttered. A spoon loaded with mashed potatoes zoomed toward my mouth, which obediently opened. Seconds later, I gagged. Beets, buried moments earlier under the mashed potatoes, spewed forth, landing (I'd like

to think) on Miss Gillespie's immaculately white uniform.

To this day, I cannot eat beets. But as my loved ones gingerly placed a mound of mashed potatoes over the beet nestled on their teaspoon, I followed suit. With a shudder and a gulp, I kept the concoction down. And as I looked around the table, I saw that, to my guests' amazement, so did they.

### The Chicken Wing

"Did you bring a *pulkie*?" I demanded.

"No, Toots, it wouldn't fit in the thermos," Imma replied, proceeding to unscrew its bright red cap, turn it upside down and place it on my hospital table. Her eyes widened as she whispered, "But I brought the next best thing." I heard the pop of the gray rubber stopper, followed by a gurgle that made my mouth water. The red cap nearly overflowed with my mother's golden elixir: schmaltz-speckled chicken soup, extra-fine noodles, chunks of carrots and onions – but no drumstick.

"Wait a minute. It's in here somewhere..." Imma poked her fork deep into the thermos and pulled it out triumphantly, brandishing the next best thing.

My face fell. "A *fliegel*?"

"Sure. That's David's favorite part."

An orderly came by to collect my untouched lunch tray. "What ya got there?"

"Chicken soup with *lokshen*," I answered proudly. "From home."

"Chicken soup with *what*?"

"Noodles," Imma translated, tousling my hair. "And a chicken wing."

Nearly 50 years later, every guest at my polio *Seder* got a steaming, savory bowl of chicken soup, prepared according to my mother's legendary recipe. My children polled each guest in advance, asking what permutation he or she preferred: soup with noodles, vegetables, chicken, all of the above or none of the above. Their poor Uncle David had to make do without the *fliegel*; it was adorning the *Seder* plate.

### The Mirror

The summertime *Seder* proceeded with *shulchan orech*: southwestern chicken, potatoes, greens and – yes! – beet salad. My guests captivated us with memories of my (and, in some cases, their) bout with polio. For hours, we basked in the pleasures of food and food for thought.

Before serving dessert, I point to the last item gracing our *Seder* plate: a small mirror. True, every iron lung sported a convex mirror through which its inhabitant could glimpse the hospital ward. But unlike its *Seder* plate companions, this hand mirror fast-forwards me beyond 1955's fight for life to ensuing battles for dignity.

I gaze into the mirror. Instantly, I am an inquisitive 10-year-old, loping along Aunt Lily's endless, exhausting hallway. What, I mean who, is that at the end of the hall? What a weird looking kid, lurching along like a locomotive with misaligned wheels! Is it a cousin? An alien? As I draw closer, myopia succumbs to proximity, imagination to reality. There I stand, face to face with Aunt Lily's full-length mirror.

"Lovely," she murmured. "Take a look in the three-way mirror." I was a college freshman in a department store's fitting room. A congenial saleswoman had just helped me fasten the final button of a dress that has caught my eye. I glanced eagerly to my left. My smile froze. Sure, there was the left shoulder, predictably lower than my right. But what was that unsightly hump bulging behind my right shoulder blade? Weren't 15 years of body casts, back braces and spinal surgeries supposed to make me straight?

I return the mirror to its place, only this time face down. I know that I need it no longer when I see the love mirrored in my cherished ones' eyes.

50 years and counting. Looking back at the isolation, the fear, the corrective surgeries, the ostracism and the discrimination, I marvel. Because with it all came an uncommon capacity for joy. I cherish the life I have been given. Yes, it's arduous, but I wouldn't have it any other way.

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